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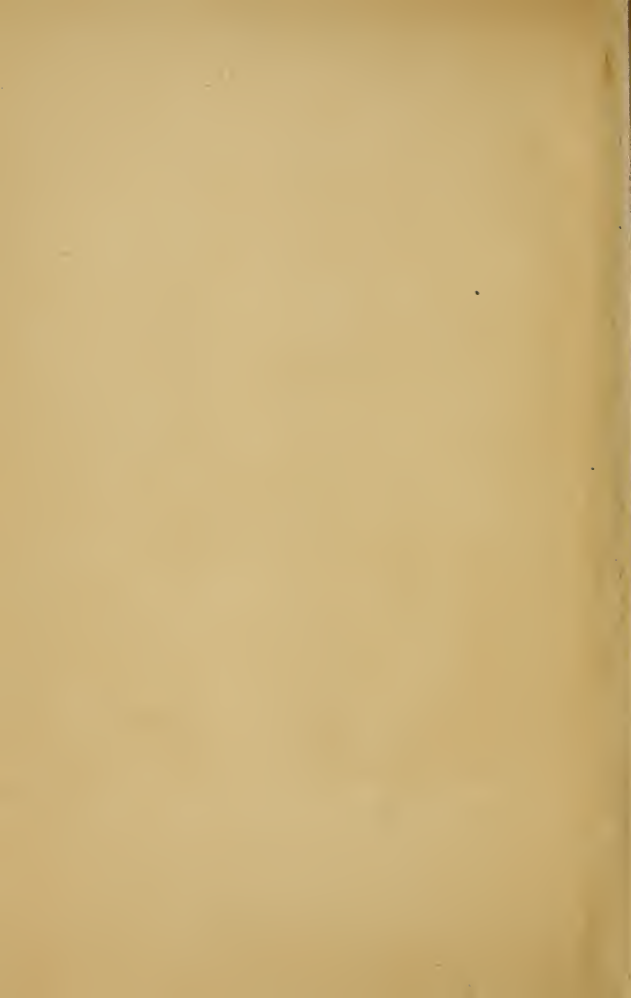
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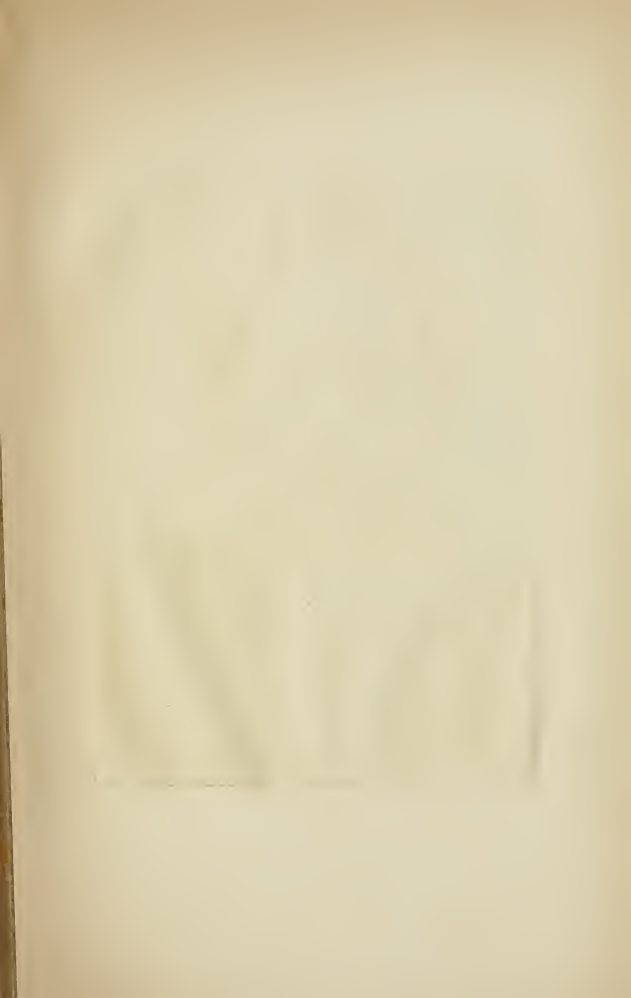
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Robert Louis Stevenson

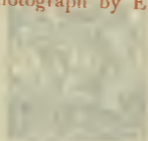
The Author

By

David Laing

Leslie Stephen

From a photograph by Elliott & Fry



With a portrait of the Author

by David Laing

and a portrait of the Author



# Robert Louis Stevenson

## An Essay

By

Leslie Stephen



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ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON





## ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

NEARLY thirty years have passed since Stevenson began to attract a circle of appreciative readers. From the first it was clear that the literary appreciation coincided with a personal attraction. As his fame extended, the admiration of readers remotest in the flesh had a tinge of friendship, while the inner circle could not distinguish between their enthusiastic affection for the man and their cordial enjoyment of his genius. So far as the biographer is concerned, the identity of the two sentiments is a clear gain. Affection, though not a sufficient, is an almost necessary qualification for a good biography. It may be doubted, however,

whether a man's friends are his best critics. The keen eye of the candid outsider has detected a tacit conspiracy in this case. The circle of friends looks unpleasantly like a clique, trying to gain a reflex glory from the fame of its hero, or to make a boast of its superior insight.

The connection, it is true, has other dangers. The tie may be broken, and the rupture, it appears, cancels all obligations to reticence. No one can then lay on the lash like the old friend who knows the weak places and has, or fancies that he has, an injury to resent. The bitterness may be intelligible, and therefore, perhaps, we should excuse a man for relieving his feelings after this peculiar fashion. I cannot say that I think the result edifying; but I make no further comment. I would rather observe that fidelity to old ties is not necessarily blinding. No one can read Mr. Calvin's notes upon his

friend's letters without admitting that his friendship has sharpened his insight. To him belongs the credit of having been the first, outside the home circle, to recognise Stevenson's genius and to give encouragement when encouragement was most needed. The keen interest enabled him to interpret both the personal and the artistic characteristics of his friend with a clearness which satisfies us of the essential fidelity of the portrait. If we differ from the valuation which he puts upon certain qualities, he gives essential help to perceiving them. We often learn more from the partisan than from the candid historian; and in criticism, as well as in history, candour may be an alias for insensibility.

It is to Mr. Colvin that I owe what is perhaps my chief claim to such respect as readers of a periodical may concede to an editor. Through his good offices,

Stevenson became one of my contributors, and I may be allowed to boast that, in his case at least, I did not nip rising genius in the bud—the feat which, according to some young authors, represents the main desire of the editorial mind. Fate, however, withheld from me the privilege of forming such an intimacy as could materially bias my opinions. So far I have a negative qualification for answering the question which so many people are eager to put: what, namely, will posterity think about Stevenson? I am content to leave the point to posterity; but in trying to sum up my own impressions, corrected by the judgment of his closer friends and critics, I may contribute to the discussion of the previous question: what was the species, not what was the degree, of praise which he will receive? Friendly criticism is apt to fail in this direction. Enthusiasts fancy that to define a man's proper

sphere is to limit his merits; they assume that other sects are necessarily hostile, and that they must remove one bust from Poet's Corner in order to make room for doing honour to their favourite. Such controversies lead to impossible problems, and attempts to find a common measure for disparate qualities. We may surely by this time agree that Tennyson and Browning excelled in different lines without asking which line was absolutely best. That will always be a matter of individual taste.

Whatever Stevenson was, he was, I think, a man of genius. I do not mean to bring him under any strict definition. My own conception of genius has been formed by an induction from the very few cases which I have been fortunate enough to observe. I may try to describe one characteristic by perverting the language of one of those instances. The late W.

K. Clifford, who had the most unmistakable stamp of genius, held that the universe was composed of "mindstuff." I don't know how that may be, but a man has genius, I should say, when he seems to be made of nothing but "mindstuff." We of coarser make have a certain infusion of mind; but it is terribly cramped and held down by matter. What we call "thinking" is often a mechanical process carried on by dead formulæ. We work out results as a phonograph repeats the sound when you insert the diaphragm already impressed with the pattern. The mental processes in the man of genius are still vital instead of being automatic. He has, as Carlyle is fond of repeating about Mirabeau, "swallowed all formulas," or rather, he is not the slave but the master of those useful intellectual tools. It is this pervading vitality which has marked such geniuses as I have known, though

it assumes very various forms. A proposition of Euclid such as "coaches" hammer into the head of a dunce to be reproduced by rote developed instantly, when inserted into Clifford's hearer, into whole systems of geometry. Genius of a different type was shown by the historian J. R. Green. You pointed out a bit of old wall, or a slope of down, and it immediately opened to him a vista of past ages, illustrating bygone social states and the growth of nations. So Stevenson heard an anecdote and it became at once the nucleus of a story, and he was on the spot a hero of romance plunging into a whole series of thrilling adventures. Connected with this, I suppose, is the invincible boyishness so often noticed as a characteristic of genius. The mind which retains its freshness can sympathise with the child to whom the world is still a novelty. Both Clifford and Green were

conspicuous for this possession of the prerogative of genius, and showed it both in being boyish themselves and in their intense sympathy with children. Clifford was never happier than in a child's party, and Green sought relief from the dreariness of a clergyman's life at the East-End by associating with the children of the district. Stevenson's boyishness was not only conspicuous, but was the very mainspring of his best work. That quality cannot be shown in a mathematical dissertation or an historical narrative, but it is invaluable for a writer of romances. The singular vivacity of Stevenson's early memories is shown by Mr. Balfour's account of his infancy as it was sufficiently revealed in the delightful *Child's Garden*. It is amusing to note that Stevenson could not even imagine that other men should be without this experience. You are indulging in "wilful paradox," he

replied to Mr. Henry James. "If a man have never been" (Mr. James alleged that he had not been) "on a quest for hidden treasure, it can be demonstrated that he has never been a child." His scheme of life, as he puts it in a charming letter to Mr. Monkhouse, was to be alternately a pirate and a leader of irregular cavalry "devastating whole valleys." Some of us, I fear, have never been pirates; and if we were anything, were perhaps already preaching infantile sermons. In any case, the castle-building propensity is often so weak as not even to leave a trace in memory. Stevenson's most obvious peculiarity was that it only strengthened with life, and, which is rarer, always retained some of the childish colouring.

A common test—for it is surely not the essence—of genius is the proverbial capacity for taking pains. Stevenson again

illustrates the meaning of the remark. Nothing is easier, says a recent German philosopher, than to give a receipt for making yourself a good novelist. Write a hundred drafts, none of them above two pages long: let each be so expressed that every word is necessary: practise putting anecdotes into the most pregnant and effective shapes; and after ten years devoted to these and various subsidiary studies, you will have completed your apprenticeship. Few novelists, I suppose, carry out this scheme to the letter; but Stevenson might have approved the spirit of the advice. Nobody would adopt it unless he had the passion for the art, which is a presumption of genius, and without genius the labour would be wasted. That, indeed, raises one of those points which are so delightful to discuss because they admit of no precise solution. When people ask whether

“form” or “content,” style or matter be the most important, it is like asking whether order or progress should be the aim of a statesman, or whether strength or activity be most needed for an athlete. Both are essential, and neither excellence will supersede necessity for the other. If you have nothing to say, there is no manner of saying it well; and if not well said, your something is as good as nothing.

For Stevenson, the question of style was the most pressing. His mind was already, as it continued to be, swarming with any number of projects; he was always acting “some fragment from his dream of human life”; the storehouse of his imagination was full to overflowing, and the question was not what to say but how to say it. Moreover, a singular delicacy of organisation gave him a love of words for their own sake; the mere sound of “Jehovah Tsidkenu” gave him a thrill

(it does not thrill me!); he was sensitive from childhood to assonance and alliteration, and in his later essay upon the *Technical Elements of Style* shows how a sentence in the *Areopagitica* involves a cunning use of the letters P V F. Language, in short, had to him a music independently of its meaning. That, no doubt, is one element of literary effect, though without a fine ear it would be hopeless to decide what pleases; and the finest ear cannot lay down the conditions of pleasing. This precocious sensitiveness developed into a clear appreciation of various qualities of style. Like other young men, he began by imitating; taking for models such curiously different writers as Hazlitt, Sir Thomas Browne, Defoe, Hawthorne, Montaigne, Beaudelaire, and Ruskin. In the ordinary cases imitation implies that the model is taken as a master. Milton probably meant, in

youth, to be a second Spenser. But the variety of Stevenson's models implies an absence of strict discipleship. He was trying to discover the secret which gave distinction to any particular style; and without adopting the manner would know how to apply it on occasion for any desired effect. How impressionable he was is curiously shown by his statement towards the end of his life, that he would not read Livy for fear of the effect upon his style. He had long before acquired a style of his own so distinctive that such a danger would strike no one else. I will not dwell upon its merits. They have been set forth, far better than I could hope to do, in Professor Raleigh's admirable study. He is a critic who shares the perceptiveness of his author. I will only note one point. A "stylist" sometimes becomes a mannerist; he acquires tricks of speech which intrude themselves inap-

propriately. Stevenson's general freedom from this fault implies that hatred to the commonplace formula of which I have spoken. His words are always alive. He came to insist chiefly upon the importance of condensation. "There is but one art," he says, "the art to omit"; or, as Pope puts it, perhaps more accurately, "the last and greatest art" is "the art to blot." That is a corollary from the theory of the right word. A writer is an "amateur," says Stevenson, "who says in two sentences what can be said in one." The artist puts his whole meaning into one perfectly accurate line, while a feebler hand tries to correct one error by superposing another, and ends by making a blur of the whole.

Stevenson, by whatever means, acquired not only a delicate style, but a style of his own. If it sometimes reminds one of models, it does not suggest that he is

speaking in a feigned voice. I think, indeed, that this precocious preoccupation with style suggests an excess of self-consciousness; a daintiness which does not allow us to forget the presence of the artist. But Stevenson did not yield to other temptations which beset the lover of exquisite form. He was no "æsthete" in the sense which conveys a reproach. He did not sympathise with the doctrine that an artist should wrap up himself in luxurious hedonism and cultivate indifference to active life. He was too much of a boy. A true boy cannot be "æsthetic." He had "day-dreams," but they were of piracy; tacit aspirations toward stirring adventure and active heroism. He dreams of a future waking. Stevenson's energies had to take the form of writing; and though he talks about his "art" a little more solemnly than one would wish, he betrays a certain hesitation as to its

claims. In a late essay, he suggests that a man who has failed in literature should take to some "more manly way of life." To "live by pleasure," he declares, "is not a high calling"; and he illustrates the proposition by speaking of such a life (not quite seriously) as a kind of intellectual prostitution. He laments his disqualification for active duties. "I think *David Balfour* a nice little book," he says, "and very artistic and just the thing to occupy the leisure of a busy life; but for the top flower of a man's life it seems to be inadequate. . . . I could have wished to be otherwise busy in this world. I ought to have been able to build light houses and write *David Balfours* too." This may be considered as the legitimate outcome of the boyish mood. It might have indicated a budding Nelson instead of a budding writer of romance.

One result was the curious misunderstanding set forth in the interesting letters to Mr. William Archer. Mr. Archer had pleased him by an early appreciation; but had—as Stevenson complains—taken him for a “rosy-gilled æsthetico-æsthete”; whereas he was really at this time a “rickety and cloistered spectre.” To Mr. Archer Stevenson’s optimism had seemed to indicate superabundant health and a want of familiarity with sorrow and sickness. A rheumatic fever, it was suggested, would try his philosophy. Mr. Archer’s hypothesis (if fairly reported) was of course the reverse of the fact. Stevenson’s whole career was a heroic struggle against disease, and it is needless to add that his sympathy with other sufferers was such as became an exquisitely sensitive nature. Neither would he admit that he overlooked the enormous mass of evil in the world. His

view is characteristic. His own position as an invalid, with "the circle of impotence closing very slowly but quite steadily round him," makes him indignant with the affectation of the rich and strong "bleating about their sorrows and the burthen of life." In a world so full of evil "one dank and dispirited word" is harmful, and it is the business of art to present gay and bright pictures which may send the reader on his way rejoicing. Then ingeniously turning the tables, he argues that Mr. Archer's acceptance of pessimism shows him to be a happy man, "raging at the misery of others." Had his critic tried for himself "what unhappiness was like," he would have found how much compensation it contains. He admits the correctness of one of Mr. Archer's remarks, that he has "a voluntary aversion from the painful sides of life." On the voyage to the leper settle-

ment at Molokai he speaks of the Zola view of the human animal; and upon reaching the place sees "sights that cannot be told and hears stories that cannot be repeated." M. Zola would have managed perhaps to tell and repeat. Stevenson is sickened by the spectacle but "touched to the heart by the sight of lovely and effective virtues in the helpless." The background of the loathsome is there; but he would rather dwell upon the moral beauty relieved against it.

Stevenson might certainly claim that his optimism did not imply want of experience or want of sympathy. And, indeed, one is inclined to ask why the question should be raised at all. A man must be a very determined pessimist if he thinks it wrong for an artist to express moods of cheerfulness or the simple joy of eventful living. We may surely be allowed to be sometimes in high spirits.

It would require some courage to infer from *Treasure Island* that the author held any philosophy. Stevenson, of course, was not a philosopher in such a sense as would have entitled him to succeed to the chair of Sir William Hamilton at Edinburgh. Yet it is true that he had some very strong and very characteristic convictions upon the questions in which philosophy touches the conduct of life. The early difficulties, the abandonment of the regular professional careers, the revolt against the yoke of the lesser catechism, the sentence to a life of invalidism enforced much reflection, some results of which are embodied in various essays. A curious indication of the progress of thought is given in his account of the "books which influenced him." It is a strangely miscellaneous list. He begins with Shakespeare, Dumas, and Bunyan; then comes Montaigne, always a favour-

ite; next, "in order of time," the Gospel according to St. Matthew; and then Walt Whitman. By an odd transition (as he observes elsewhere) Walt Whitman's influence blends with that of Mr. Herbert Spencer. "I should be much of a hound," he says, "if I lost my gratitude to Herbert Spencer." Next comes Lewes's *Life of Goethe*—though there is no one whom he "less admires than Goethe." Martial, Marcus Aurelius, Wordsworth, and Mr. G. Meredith's *Egoist* follow, and he notes that an essay of Hazlitt "on the spirit of obligation" formed a "turning-point in his life." One would have been glad of a comment upon the last, for the essay is one in which Hazlitt shows his most cynical side, and explains how frequently envy and selfishness are concealed under a pretence of conferring obligations. Stevenson, perhaps, took it as he took Mr. Meredith's novel, for an ethical lec-

ture, revealing the Protean forms of egoism more or less common to us all.

Stevenson clearly was not one of the young gentlemen who get up a subject systematically. He read as chance and curiosity dictated. A new author did not help him to fill up gaps in a theory; but became a personal friend, throwing out pregnant hints and suggesting rapid glances from various points of view into different aspects of life. Each writer in turn carried on a lively and suggestive conversation with him; but he cares little for putting their remarks into the framework of an abstract theory. He does not profess to form any judgment of Mr. Spencer's system; he is content to find him "bracing, manly, and honest." He feels the ethical stimulant. He is attracted by all writers whose words have the ring of genuine first-hand conviction; who reveal their own souls—with a good

many defects, it may be, but at least bring one into contact with a bit of real, unsophisticated human nature. He can forgive Walt Whitman's want of form, and rejoice in the "barbaric yawp" which utterly rejects and denounces effete conventionalism. What he hates above all is the Pharisee. "Respectability," he says in *Lay Morals*, is "the deadliest gag and wet blanket that can be laid on man." He is, that is to say, a Bohemian; but he is a Bohemian who is tempered for good or (as some critics would say) for bad by morality and the lesser catechism. He sympathises with Whitman's combination of egoism and altruism. "Morality has been ceremoniously extruded at the door (by Whitman) only to be brought in again by the window." So Stevenson's Bohemianism only modifies without obliterating his moral prejudices. Scotsman as he was to the verge of fanaticism,

he refused to shut his eyes to the coarser elements in the national idol. The *Lay Morals* is specially concerned with the danger of debasing the moral currency. In spirit the Christian principles are absolutely right; but as soon as they are converted into an outward law, the spirit tends to be superseded by the letter, and the hypocrite finds a convenient shelter under the formula which has parted company from the true purpose. An interesting bit of autobiography is made to illustrate the point. "Thou shalt not steal," he says, is a good rule; but what is stealing? Something is to be said for the communist theory that property is theft. While his father was supporting him at the University, where he was surrounded by fellow-students whose lives were cramped by poverty, he considered that his allowance could be excusable only when regarded as a loan advanced

by mankind. He lived as sparingly as he could, grudged himself all but necessities, and hoped that in time he might repay the debt by his services.

No very definite conclusion was to emerge from such speculation. Stevenson was to become a novelist, not a writer of systematic treatises upon ethics or sociology. The impulses, however, survived in various forms. They are shown, for example, in the striking essay called *Pulvis et Umbra*. It is his answer to the pessimistic view of men considered as merely multiplying and struggling units. Everywhere we find that man has yet aspirations and imperfect virtues. "Of all earth's meteors," he says, "here, at least, is the most strange and consoling; that this ennobled lemur, this hair-crowned bubble of the dust, this inheritor of a few years and sorrows, should yet deny himself his rare delights and add to

his frequent pains and live for an ideal, however misconceived." This view implies his sympathy with the publican as against the Pharisee. We should cherish whatever aspirations may exist, even in the pot-house or the brothel, instead of simply enforcing conformity to the law. We should like the outcast because he is, after all, the really virtuous person. To teach a man blindly to obey public opinion is to "discredit in his eyes the one authoritative voice of his own soul. He may be a docile citizen; he will never be a man." The sanctity of the individual in this sense explains, perhaps, what was the teaching in which Walt Whitman and Mr. Herbert Spencer seemed to him to coincide.

The "philosophy" is the man. It is the development of the old boyish sentiment. Disease and trouble might do their worst; the career of the "pirate,"

or even more creditable forms of the adventurous, might be impracticable; but at least he could meet life gallantly, find inexhaustible interest even in trifling occupations when thrown upon his back by ill-health, and cheer himself against temptations to pessimistic melancholy by sympathy with every human being who showed a touch of the heroic spirit. His essay upon the old *Admirals* is characteristic. His heart goes out to Nelson, with his "peerage or Westminster Abbey," and even more to the four marines of the *Wager*, abandoned of necessity to a certain death, but who yet, as they watched their comrades pulling away, gave three cheers and cried, "God bless the King!" In *Æs Triplex* he gives the same moral with a closer application to himself:

"It is best," he says, "to begin your folio; even if the doctor does not give you a year, even if he hesitates about a

month, make one brave push, see what can be finished in a week. . . . All who have meant good work with their whole heart have done good work, although they may die before they have the time to sign it. . . . Life goes down with a better grace foaming in full tide over a precipice, than miserably struggling to an end in sandy deltas." That, he explains, is the true meaning of the saying about those whom the gods love. At whatever age death may come, the man who dies so dies young.

This gallant spirit, combined with extraordinarily quick and vivid sympathy, gives, I think, a main secret of the charm which endeared Stevenson both to friends and readers. His writings showed anything but the insensibility to human sorrows of the jovial, full-blooded athlete. It must be admitted, however, that if he did not ignore the darker side of things,

he disliked dwelling upon it or admitting the necessity of surrender to melancholy, or even incorporating such thoughts in your general view of life. In some of his early work, especially in *Ordered South*, his first published essay, and in *Will o' the Mill*, a different note of sentiment is sounded. The invalid ordered south is inclined to console himself by reflecting that he is "one too many in the world." This, says Stevenson in a later note, is a "very youthful view." As prolonged life brings more interests, the thought that we cannot play out our part becomes more, not less, painful. To some of us, I fear, every year that we live only emphasises our insignificance. To Stevenson such resignation savoured of cowardice. *Will o' the Mill* is certainly one of his most finished and exquisite pieces of work. He told Mr. Balfour that it was written as an "experiment."

His own favourite doctrine was that "acts may be forgiven, but not even God can forgive the hanger back"; *Will o' the Mill* was written "to see what could be said in support of the opposite theory." The essay suggests the influence of Hawthorne and shows a similar skill in symbolising a certain mood. It implies, no doubt, a capacity for so far assuming the mood as to make it harmonious or self-consistent; but I cannot perceive that it makes it attractive. Translated into vulgar realism, Will would be a stout innkeeper, who will not risk solid comfort by marrying the girl whom he likes. He hardly loves her. He prefers to help his guests to empty his cellar. Will lives in so vague a region that we do not test him as we should in real life; but, after all, the story affects me less as an apology than as a satire. If that be really all that can be said for the prudential view

of life, it is surely as contemptible as Stevenson thought the corresponding practice. He has a little grudge against Matthew Arnold, whose general merits he acknowledges, for having introduced him to Obermann, for in Obermann he finds only "inhumanity." The contrast is shown, as Professor Raleigh points out, by Arnold's poem on the *Grande Chartreuse* and Stevenson's *Our Lady of the Snows*. Arnold is tempted for the time to seek peace among the recluses, though he cannot share their belief. Stevenson "treats them" to a sharp remonstrance. He prefers to be "up and doing." He warns them that the Lord takes delight in deeds, and approves those who—

Still with laughter, song and shout,  
Spin the great wheel of earth about.

"Perhaps," he concludes,

Our cheerful general on high  
With careless look may pass you by.

If I had to accept either estimate as complete I should agree with Stevenson. Yet Stevenson's attitude shows his limitations. The sentiment which makes men ascetic monks; the conviction of the corruption of mankind, of the futility of all worldly pleasures; the renunciation of the active duties of life; and the resolute trampling upon the flesh as the deadly enemy of the spirit, may strike us as cowardly and immoral, or at best represents Milton's "fugitive and cloistered virtue." Still it is a mood which has been so conspicuous in many periods that it is clearly desirable to recognise whatever appeal it contained to the deeper instincts of humanity. Matthew Arnold recurred fondly but provisionally to the peacefulness and harmony of the old order of conception, though he was as

convinced as anyone that it rested on a decayed foundation. The enlightenment of the species is, of course, desirable, and may lead ultimately to a more satisfactory solution; but for the moment its destructive and materialising tendencies justify a tender treatment of the survival of the old ideal. Stevenson was no bigot, and could most cordially admire the Catholic spirit as embodied in the heroism of a Father Damien. But when it took this form of simple renunciation it did not appeal to him. In fact, it corresponds to the kind of pessimism which was radically uncongenial. Life, for him, is, or can be made, essentially bright and full of interest. He agrees with Mr. Herbert Spencer that it is a duty to be happy; and to be happy not by crushing your instincts but by finding employment for them. Confined to his bed and sentenced to silence, he could still preserve his old boyishness;

even his childish amusements. "We grown people," he says in an essay, "can tell ourselves a story, give and take strokes till the bucklers ring, ride far and fast, marry, fall, and die; all the while sitting quietly by the fire or lying prone in bed"—whereas a child must have a toy sword or fight with a bit of furniture. Indeed, he was not above toys in later days. He spent a large part of one winter, as Mr. Balfour tells us, building with toy bricks; and beginning to join in a schoolboy's amusement of tin soldiers, developed an elaborate "war game" which occupied many hours at Davos.

We can understand why Symonds called him "sprite." The amazing vitality which kept him going under the most depressing influences was combined with the "sprite's" capricious and, to most adults, unintelligible modes of spending superfluous energy. Whatever he took

up, serious or trifling,—novel writing, childish toys, or even, for a time, political agitation,—he threw his whole soul into it as if it were the sole object of existence. He impressed one at first sight as a man whose nerves were always in a state of over-tension. Baxter says that Cromwell was a man “of such a vivacity, hilarity, and alacrity as another man hath when he hath drunken a cup too much.”\* Stevenson—not very like Cromwell in other respects—seemed to find excitement a necessity of existence. He speaks to a correspondent of the timidity of youth. “I was,” he says, “a particularly brave boy”—ready to plunge into rash adventures, but “in fear of that strange, blind machinery in which I stood. I fear life still,” he adds, and “that terror for an adventurer like myself is one of the chief

\* A similar remark was made about Ninon de l'Enclos. They make a queer trio.

joys of living." Terror keeps one wide awake and highly strung. Inextinguishable playfulness, with extraordinary quickness of sympathy; an impulsiveness which means accessibility to every generous and heroic nature; and a brave heart in a feeble body, ought to be, as they are, most fascinating qualities. But it is true that they imply a limitation. So versatile a nature, glancing off at every contact, absorbed for the moment by every impulse, has not much time for listening to the "Cherub Contemplation." Stevenson turns from "the painful aspects of life," not from the cowardice which refuses to look one in the face, but from the courage which manages not to turn us a counter-irritant. His "view of life," he says, "is essentially the comic and the romantically comic." He loves, as he explains, the comedy "which keeps the beauty and touches the terrors of life";

which tells its story "not with the one eye of pity but with the two of pity and mirth." We should arrange our little drama so that, without ignoring the tragic element, the net outcome may be a state of mind in which the terror becomes, as danger became to Nelson, a source of joyous excitement.

What I have so far said has more direct application to the essayist than to the novelist; and to most readers, I suppose, the novelist is the more interesting of the two. As an essayist, however, Stevenson becomes an unconscious critic of the stories. The essays define the point of view adopted by the story-teller. One quality is common to all his writings. The irrepressible youthfulness must be remembered to do justice to the essays. We must not ask for deep thought employed upon long experience; or expect to be impressed, as we are impressed in

reading Bacon, by aphorisms in which the wisdom of a lifetime seems to be concentrated. We admire the quick feeling, the dexterity and nimbleness of intellect. The thought of "Crabbed Age and Youth" is obvious enough, but the performance reminds us of Robin Oig in *Kidnapped*. He repeated the air played by Alan Breck, but "with such ingenuity and sentiment, with so odd a fancy and so quick a knack in the grace-notes that I was amazed to hear him." Stevenson's "grace-notes" give fresh charm to the old theme. The critical essays, again, may not imply a very wide knowledge of literature or familiarity with orthodox standards of judgment. They more than atone for any such defects by the freshness and the genuine ring of youthful enthusiasm. I am hopelessly unable, for example, to appreciate Walt Whitman. Stevenson himself only regretted that he

had qualified his enthusiasm by noticing too pointedly some of his author's shortcomings. The shortcomings still stick in my throat; but if I cannot catch the enthusiasm my dulness is so far enlightened that I can partly understand why Whitman fascinated Stevenson and other good judges. That, at least, is so much clear gain. To read Stevenson's criticisms is like revisiting a familiar country with a young traveller who sees it for the first time. He probably makes some remarks that we have heard before; but he is capable of such a thrill of surprise as Keats received from Chapman's *Homer*.

The "love of youth," says Mr. Henry James in an admirable essay, "is the beginning and end of Stevenson's message." Mr. James was writing before Stevenson's last publications, and was thinking specially perhaps of *Treasure Island*. Now to me, I confess,—for I fear that it is a

confession,—*Treasure Island* is the one story which I can admire without the least qualification or reserve. The aim may not be the highest, but it is attained with the most thorough success. It may be described as a “message” in the sense that it appeals to the boyish element. Stevenson has described the fit of inspiration in which he wrote it. He had a schoolboy for audience; his father became a schoolboy to collaborate; and when published it made schoolboys of Gladstone and of the editor of the “cynical” *Saturday Review*. We believe in it as we believe in *Robinson Crusoe*. My only trouble is that I have always thought that, had I been in command of the *Hispaniola*, I should have adopted a different line of defence against the conspirators. My plan would have spoilt the story, but I regret the error as I regret certain real blunders which were supposed to have

changed the course of history. I have always wondered that, after such a proof of his powers of fascination, Stevenson should only have achieved full recognition by *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. That book, we are told, was also written in a fit of inspiration, suggested by dreaming a "fine bogey tale." The public liked it because it became an allegory—a circumstance, I fear, which does not attract me. But considered as a "bogey tale," able to revive the old thrill of delicious horror in one who does not care for psychical research, it has the same power of carrying one away by its imaginative intensity. These masterpieces in their own way suggest one remark. Mr. Balfour points out that Stevenson did an enormous quantity of work, considering not only his ill-health, but the fact that he often worked very slowly, that he destroyed many sketches, and that he rewrote some

articles as often as seven or eight times. Thanks to his "dire industry," as he said himself, he had "done more with smaller gifts" (one must excuse the modest formula), "than almost any man of letters in the world." This restless energy, however, did not mean persistent labour upon one task; but a constant alternation of tasks. When inspiration failed him for one book, he took up another, and waited for the fit to return. One result is that there is often a want of continuity, when his stories do not, as in *Treasure Island*, represent a single uninterrupted effort. *Kidnapped*, for example, is made up of two different stories, and *The Wrecker* is a curious example of piecing together heterogeneous fragments. Moreover, a good deal of the work is the product of a feebler exercise of the fancy intercalated between the general fits of inspiration. The unde-

niably successful books, where he has thrown himself thoroughly into the spirit of the story, stand out among a good deal of very inferior merit. I will confine myself to speaking of the four Scottish novels which appear to be accepted as his best achievements, and to endeavouring to point out what was the proper sphere of his genius.

They represent a development of the *Treasure Island* method. He began *Kidnapped* as another book for boys, and the later stories may be classed for some purposes with the Waverley series. Stevenson was fond of discussing the classification of novels. He contrasts the "novel of adventure," the novel of character, and the dramatic novel. Properly speaking, this is not a classification of radically different species, but an indication of the different sources of interest upon which a novelist may draw. "Adventure" need

not exclude "character." A perfect novel might accept, with a change of name, Mr. Meredith's title, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*. The facts are interesting, because they show character in the crucible; and the character displays itself most forcibly by the resulting action. A complete fusion, however, is no doubt rare, and requires consummate art. *Treasure Island*, of course, is a pure novel of adventure. It satisfies what he somewhere describes as the criterion of a good "romance." The writer and his readers throw themselves into the events, enjoy the thrilling excitement, and do not bother themselves with questions of psychology. *Treasure Island*, indeed, contains Silver, who, to my mind, is his most successful hero. But Silver incarnates the spirit in which the book is to be read; the state of mind in which we accept genial good humour as a complete apology

for cold-blooded murder. Piracy is for the time to be merely one side of the game; and in a serious picture of human life, which of course is out of our sphere, we should have required a further attempt to reconcile us to the psychological monstrosity. In the later stories we assume that the adventurers are to be themselves interesting as well as the adventure. Still, the story is to hold the front place. We may come to be attracted to the problems of character presented by the author, but the development of the story must never for a moment be sacrificed to expositions of the sentiments. We must not expect from Stevenson such reflections as Thackeray indulges upon the "Vanity of Vanities," or a revelation, such as George Eliot gives in *The Mill on the Floss*, of the inner life of the heroine. Either method may be right for its own purpose; and I mean so far only to de-

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fine, not to criticise, Stevenson's purpose. It is not only possible to tell a story in Stevenson's manner, "cutting off the flesh off the bones" of his stories, as he says, and yet to reveal the characters; but critics who object to all intrusions of the author as commentator hold this to be the most legitimate and effective method. Here, however, the limitation means something more than a difference of method.

I do not think, to speak frankly, that any novelist of power comparable to his has created so few living and attractive characters. Mr. Sidney Colvin confesses to having been for a time blinded to the imaginative force of the *Beach of Falesa* by his dislike to the three wretched heroes. One is deservedly shot, and the two others, credited with some redeeming points, lose whatever interest they possessed when they accept conversion to

avoid death from a missionary's revolver. However vivid the scenery, I cannot follow the fate of such wretches with a pretence of sympathy. There is a similar drawback about the *Master of Ballantrae*. The younger brother, who is blackmailed by the utterly reprobate Master, ought surely to be interesting instead of being simply sullen and dogged. In the later adventures, we are invited to forgive him on the ground that his brain has been affected; but the impression upon me is that he is sacrificed throughout to the interests of the story. He is cramped in character because a man of any real strength would have broken the meshes upon which the adventure depends. The curious exclusion of women is natural in the purely boyish stories, since to a boy woman is simply an incumbrance upon reasonable modes of life. When in *Catriona* Stevenson introduces a love-story,

it is still unsatisfactory, because David Balfour is so much of the undeveloped animal that his passion is clumsy, and his charm for the girl unintelligible. I cannot feel, to say the truth, that in any of these stories I am really living among human beings with whom, apart from their adventures, I can feel any very lively affection or antipathy. Mr. Balfour praises Stevenson for his sparing use of the pathetic. That is to apologise for a weakness on the ground that it is not the opposite weakness. It is quite true that an excessive use of pathos is offensive, but it is equally true that a power of appealing to our sympathies by genuine pathos is a mark of the highest power in fiction. The novelist has to make us feel that it is a necessity, not a mere luxury, that he is forced to weep, not weeping to exhibit his sensibility; but to omit it altogether is to abnegate one of

his chief functions. That Stevenson's feelings, far from being cold, were abnormally keen, can be doubted by no one; but his view of fiction keeps him out of the regions in which pathos is appropriate. Any way, I feel that there is a whole range of sentiment familiar to other writers which Stevenson rarely enters or even touches.

The character to which I am generally referred as a masterpiece is that of Alan Breck. Mr. Henry James speaks of that excellent Highlander as a psychological triumph, and regards him as a study of the passion for glory. Mr. James speaks with authority; and I will admit that he is a very skilful combination of the hero and the braggart—qualities which are sometimes combined, as they were to some degree in Nelson and Wolfe. Somehow, perhaps because I am not a Gael, I can never feel that he is fully

alive. He suggests to me the artist's study, not the man who appeals to us because his creator has really thrown himself unreservedly into the part. When I compare him, for example, with Dugald Dalgetty (I must venture a comparison for once) he seems to illustrate the difference between skilful construction and genial intuition. He may suggest one other point. Scott was for Stevenson the "King of the Romanticists." Romance, as understood by Scott, meant among other things the attempt to revive a picture of old social conditions. He was interested, in his own phraseology, in the contrast between ancient and modern manners, and his favourite periods are those in which the feudal ideals came into conflict with the more modern commercial state. This interest often interferes with his art as a story-teller. The hero of *Waverley*, for example, is a mere walk-

ing letter of introduction to Fergus Mac-Ivor, the type of a chief of a clan modified by modern civilisation. The story halts in order to give us a full portrait of the state of things in which a semi-barbarous order was confronted with the opposing forces. Scott, in fact, began from a profound interest in the social phenomena (to use a big word) around him. He was full of the legends, the relics of the old customs and ways of thought, but was also a lawyer and a keen politician. His story-telling often represents a subordinate aim. Stevenson just reverses the process. He started as an "artist," abnormally sensitive to the qualities of style and literary effect to which Scott was audaciously indifferent. His first interest is in any scene or story which will fit in with his artistic purposes. Life swarmed with themes for romance, as rivers are made to supply canals. The attitude is

illustrated by his incursions into politics. He was stirred to wrath by Mr. Gladstone's desertion (as he thought it) of Gordon, and could not afterwards write a letter to the guilty statesman because he would have had to sign himself "Your fellow-criminal in the sight of God." He was roused by the boycotting of the Curtin family to such a degree that he could scarcely be withheld from settling on their farm to share their dangers and stir his countrymen to a sense of shame. His righteous indignation in the case of Father Damien, and the zeal with which he threw himself into the Samoan troubles, are equally in character. The small scale of the Samoan business made it a personal question. He came to the conclusion, however, that politics meant "the darkest, most foolish, and most random of human employments," and though he had an aversion to Gladstone,

had no definite political creed. Political strife, that is, only touched him when some individual case appealed to the chivalrous sentiment.

In the same way the story of the clans interests him by its artistic capabilities. The flight of Alan Breck gave an opportunity, seized with admirable skill, for a narrative of exciting adventure; and he takes full advantage of picturesque figures in the history of his time. But one peculiarity is significant. The adventure turns upon a murder which, according to him, was not committed, though certainly not disapproved, by Alan Breck. Now, complicity in murder, or, let us say, homicide, is a circumstance of some importance. Before landlord-shooting is regarded as a venial or a commendable practice we ought to be placed at the right point of view to appreciate it. We cannot take it as easily as Mr. Silver took

piracy. We should see enough of the evictions or of the social state of the clansmen to direct our sympathies. No doubt if Stevenson had insisted upon such things, he would have written a different book. He would have had to digress from the adventures and to introduce characters irrelevant in that sense, who might have been types of the classes of a semi-civilised society. Perhaps the pure story of adventure is a better thing. I only say that it involves the omission of a great many aspects of life which have been the main pre-occupation of novelists of a different class. Stevenson once told Mr. Balfour that a novelist might devise a plot and find characters to suit, or he might reverse the process; or finally, he might take a certain atmosphere and get "both persons and actions to express it." He wrote the *Merry Men* as embodying the sentiment caused by a

sight of a Scottish island. That, indeed, is an explanation of some of his most skilful pieces of work, and the South Seas as well as his beloved country gave materials for such "impressionist" pictures. But besides the atmosphere of scenery, there is what may be called the social atmosphere. To reproduce the social atmosphere of a past epoch is the aim—generally missed—of the historical novelist; but it is the prerogative of the more thoughtful novelist to set before you in concrete types, not only personal character, but the moral and intellectual idiosyncrasies of the epoch, whether remote or contemporary. The novelist is not to lecture; but the great novels give the very age and body of the time "its form and feature." I will give no instances because they would be superfluous and also because they would suggest a comparison which I would rather exclude as

misleading. That is the element which is absent from Stevenson's work.

The affection which Stevenson inspires needs no justification. The man's extraordinary gallantry, his tender-heartedness, the chivalrous interest so easily aroused by any touch of heroism, the generosity shown in his hearty appreciation of possible rivals, are beyond praise. His rapid glances at many aspects of life show real insight and singular delicacy, a sensibility of moral instinct, and the thought is expressed or gently indicated with the most admirable literary tact. The praise of versatility again is justified by the variety of themes which he has touched, always with vivacity and often with a masterly handling within certain limits. When panegyrics, dwelling upon these topics, have been most unreservedly accepted, it is a mistake to claim incompatible merits. The "Bohemian," —

taking Stevenson's version of the character,—the man who looks from the outside upon the ordinary humdrum citizen, may be a very fascinating personage; but he really lacks something. Delighted with the exceptional and the picturesque, he has less insight into the more ordinary and, after all, most important springs of action. The excitable temperament, trying to stir every moment of life with some thrill of vivid feeling, and dreaming adventures to fill up every interstice of active occupation, is hardly compatible with much reflection. The writer whose writing is the outcome of long experience, who has brooded long and patiently over the problems of life, who has tried to understand the character of his fellows and to form tenable ideals for himself, may not have accepted any systematic philosophy; but he represents the impression made by life upon a thoughtful

mind, and has formed some sort of coherent and often professedly interesting judgment upon its merits. He is sometimes a bore, it is true; but sometimes, too, we have experience which is ripe without being mouldy. The rapid, vivid "sprite," the natural Bohemian impinging upon society at a dozen different parts, turning from the painful aspects of life, and from the first considering life as intended to suggest romance rather than romance as reflecting life, could not possibly secrete that kind of wisdom. He had a charm of his own, and I do not inquire whether it was better or worse; I only think that we do him injustice when we claim merits belonging to a different order. His admirers hold that *Weir of Hermiston* would have shown profounder insight founded upon longer experience. I will not argue the point. That it contains one very powerful scene is unde-

niable. That it shows power of rivalling on their own ground the great novelists who have moved in a higher sphere is not plain to me. At any rate, the claim seems to be a tacit admission of the absence of certain qualities from the previous work. "He might have" implies "he did not." But I have said enough to indicate what I take to be the right method of appreciating Stevenson without making untenable claims.

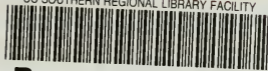






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